DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 193 714 CS 503 086

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TITLE Coorientation in the Network Television Newsprocessing System: Coverage of the United States House of Representatives.
PUB DATE May 80
NOTE 15p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (30th, Acapulco, Mexico, May 18-23, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attitudes; *Communication Research; *Legislators; Networks; *News Media; *News Reporting; Research Methodology; Television
IDENTIFIERS *House of Representatives

ABSTRACT

A coorientation methodology was used to examine attitudes toward reporting news about the United States House of Representatives. Coorientation models are predicated upon the interrelationships of individuals in a communication system, measuring participants' attitudes in terms of agreement, accuracy, and congruency. Subjects included three executive producers of network news programs, four television news correspondents covering the House of Representatives, and the 112 members of Congress who answered the 34-item questionnaire used in the study. The results showed that members of the House of Representatives believed network coverage of their institution was simplistic, fragmentary, and inadequate, and that network news gathering routines failed to accommodate some of the most substantive and important issues addressed by the House. The correspondents defined important issues with a variety of choices, while the producers' perceptions were unanimous--reinforcing the stereotype that network television news is controlled by persons with a singular perspective of world events. House members were pessimistic about changing the status quo and had diminished expectations of increasing network access by sharpening their own communication skills. Overall, the coorientation method proved to be a valid instrument for attitudinally positioning the three groups involved in the network television newsprocessing system. (RL)

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COORIENTATION IN THE NETWORK TELEVISON NEWSPROCESSING SYSTEM: COVERAGE OF THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Paper presented to the Political Communication Division of the International Communication Association Convention, Acapulco, Mexico, May, 1980.

Edward Epstein, in his book News from Nowhere, maintained that the production of network television news was a complex industrial process governed more by organizational factors than a mirroring of reality.[1] Within the system where news is processed, Epstein said some stories, persons, and institutions, partially because of organizational constraints, had a better opportunity of receiving coverage than others. In the case of federal governmental institutions in Washington, Epstein contended that a de facto hierarchical structure consistently placed the President and his spokesmen at the top of the access ladder, the Senate in the middle and the House of Representatives at the bottom. He also observed the presence of organizational constraints which discriminated against coverage of complex legislative issues. Those within the broadcasting industry, however, have blamed organizational barriers imposed by Congress as reasons for lack of coverage.[2]

The House has consistently received a low priority in the hierarchy of routines which influence content on the network evening news. Congressional access is mostly limited to a handful of party leaders and committee chairmen; the average House member is largely disenfranchised from the network television newsprocessing system. Even the opening of house proceedings to broadcasters, once touted as a panacea for increased exposure, has not altered coverage patterns.

Several studies have examined the relationship between newsprocessors and newsgatherers and the relationship between newsgatherers and news sources, but few researchers have attempted to look at all three elements as interrelated parts of a newsprocessing system.[3] Futhermore, most studies have considered participants as individuals rather than as participants in complex bureaucratic organizations. Most of the information concerning organizational factors which influence network newsgathering come from participant observer studies.

These observations have given us insight into the routines of newsgathering and the norms which influence whether or not a particular kind of story is covered.

This study uses a coorientation methodology to examine organizational factors from the perspective of the three groups which comprise the network television newsprocessing system as it applies to the U.S. House of Representatives (executive producers, correspondents, and congressmen). By examining their perceptions of coverage of low priority news source (the U.S. House of Representatives) and their specific ranking of issues associated with that news source, it is hoped that a clearer picture of the newsprocessing system might emerge.

Based on previous research, one can predict a certain amount of disagreement between congressional news sources and network newsprocessors and newsgatherers. House members can be expected to be somewhat dissatisfied with the newsprocessing system. The producers and correspondents, on the other hand, can be expected to uphold the status quo, claiming that the level of news coverage of the House is representative of its newsworthiness. We do not know, however, how much solidarity exists within each group and how large differences between the three groups are. Neither do we know if differences between congressmen and network employees are more pronounced at the newsprocessing or newsgathering level. Furthermore, we do not know if correspondents are as firmly committed to the status quo as producers and whether any tendency exists for correspondents to agree more with congressmen than their own organizations.

Not only is it important to understand how closely newsprocessors, newsgatherers, and news sources are allied, but also how the three groups perceive this closeness. How accurately can each group predict the attitudes of the others and how closely do they perceive themselves as being connected with these groups? One would assume that correspondents,

who deal with congressmen and their executive producers on a daily basis, would be more accurate in predicting attitudes than either of the two groups. Presumably, congressmen would be the least accurate in guaging perceptions as most are estranged from the network television newsgathering system. It is probable that newsmen and congressmen would see themselves as adversaries. If a strong system of social control exists, executive producers might expect their correspondents to be in close agreement with them. Is it possible that correspondents would see themselves as closer to congressmen than their own producers?

METHOD

The coorientation model is predicated upon the interrelationships of individuals in a communication system.[4] When two people are communicating about the same thing, they are cooriented to it. Attitudes can be measured in terms of agreement (A agrees with B); accuracy (A can predict B's attitudes); and congruency (A thinks B agrees with him).[5]

The coorientation model has thus far been applied to interpersonal communication, to relationships between newsgatherers and news sources, to newsprocessors' perceptions of readers' attutudes and vice versa, and to the measurement of attitudes and values within a newsprocessing system of reporters, editors, and publishers at a newspaper.[6] No studies have been undertaken within a single broadcast newsprocessing system consisting of newsgatherers, newprocessors and news sources.

This study design was constructed using the executive producers of network evening news (newsprocessors), network correspondents assigned to the House of Representatives (newsgatherers) and members of the U.S. House of Representatives (news sources). Each is cooriented towards the other as an active participant in the network evening news newsprocessing system. Executive producers in New York make assignments to congressional correspondents in Washington which bring them in contact with congressional news sources. Stories about news sources are transmitted from the correspondents back to the executive producer who makes a final decision on whether the

story should be broadcast.

Employing the coorientation model as the research instrument, the three groups are treated as interrelated groups in a dynamic organizational process. It is hoped that the use of this method can help to provide a unique composite picture of the interrelationships between government organizations and news organizations rather than isolated, unrelated snapshots captured by previous research. As this model has rarely been applied to mass communication research and never to the network television newsprocessing system, its use in this study must be considered exploratory.

A thirty-four item questionnaire was distributed to 435 members of the House of Representatives in December, 1978, by the Speaker's Office which attached a letter explaining the purpose of the research, who was conducting it, and urging cooperation. One hundred-twelve questionnaires were returned for a twenty-six percent response rate. The responses were generally representative of House members in terms of party, seniority, and district location.[7] While this response rate is low by social science standards, congressional questionnaires have traditionally not yielded high levels of response even when the House has tried to survey its own members.[8] While few would disagree that a high response rate increases validity, some researchers have discounted the importance of high returns when homogeneous groups are surveyed.[9] Leslie said that when people identify strongly with a particular group and are asked questions important to that group, there will be little evidence of a response-rate bias. He contended that any evidence of bias would manifest itself in demographic characteristics which were subsidiary to group attitudes.

Questionnaires were administered to the three network television executive producers in New York and to four network correspondents covering the House in Washington in December, 1978. Because of the problems with blending data gathers from a sample of 112, a sample of 4 and a census of 3, results will be presented in a generalized format with few references to numerical findings. All references cited, however, reflect

definitive majority attitudes unless otherwise indicated.

RESULTS

In most cases, results showed that Congressmen differed with network correspondents and producers. A majority of congressmen believed that media coverage of Congress was seriously inadequate, while the majority of correspondents and producers did not. Likewise, members strongly believed that the television networks largely ignored the House in favor of the President. All network producers and correspondents disagreed. These statements seemed to arouse adversary tensions that have been common in the two institutions for years. With the rise of the "imperial presidency" has come the intense feeling within the House that its constitutional strength is being sapped by the extraordinary television access the networks bestow on the President and the executive branch.

Data in this study indicate that the House believes it has been relegated to a low priority status within the network newsprocessing system and is discriminated against regularly in terms of network access. Most House members rated an assignment to the House of Representatives as average or below average compared to other Washington assignments, while all network respondents said it was above average, the majority believing it was one of the best assignments. This contrast could be symptomatic of the discrimination perceived by House members and the taboo against the network's acknowledging the presence of organizational constraints. Producers must carry the newsman's mantle of objectivity and equality of access. To admit that one news source did not have equal opportunity for access would destroy the notion that the networks hold a mirror up to society, reflecting what is happening without distortion. Likewise, correspondents must believe that their assignment occupies high status within the news system in order to maintain morale and collegial respect. They have a vested interest in thinking of themselves as among the elite of network correspondents.

Network producers and correspondents are also sensitive to the question of political bias which reached its zenith a few years after former Vice President Agnew's attacks on the media in the late 1960's. As expected, all network respondents agreed that Republicans and Democrats have an equal chance of gaining exposure on the network evening news. The newsmen were joined by the majority of Democrats who also perceived no political bias. Eighty-five percent of the Republican respondents, however, believed that their party was slighted in terms of access. Thus, while the political bias turmoil has died down in recent years, a latent Republican dissatisfaction appears strong and unified in the House of Representatives. This perception of political bias appears to have no factual grounding as there was no significant difference between the levels of network media exposure Republicans and Democrats said they received during the 95th Congress.

Contrary to popular belief, House respondents did not believe that either giving more access to the networks or sharpening its communication skills would greatly increase the level of network coverage. In fact, a sizeable minority believed that nothing the House does can increase coverage. This fatalistic attitude is particularly surprising as the House had just concluded several years of hearings and had issued reports based on the premise that the House could, by it own actions, have some impact on the amount of network coverage it received.

Some correspondents, taking an opposite view of their superiors, agreed with members that the networks did not really understand the legislative process and that the networks could distort congressional proceedings if they are allowed to broadcast them. While this maverick attitude could imply a softening of conformity between House newsgatherers and newsprocessors, other data indicated social control at the networks was fairly high.

The greatest disagreement between correspondents and producers came on the following statement,"It is difficult for network television correspondents to convince executive producers to broadcast stories that have had no exposure from other media."

All three producers disagreed while the four correspondents agreed. It has long been the network television conventional wisdom that executive producers rely too extensively on major newspapers and competing networks for story ideas and not enough on their own correspondents. In recent years, however, network executives have boasted that their news operations have matured to the extent that they no longer have to rely on print and broadcast competitors for leadership. The response to this survey question, however, indicates that the old rules are still perceived by ocrrespondents to be operational. There appears to be little reward for correspondents to propose unorthodox story lines as producers prefer established stories acknowledged by competitors to be news.

In order to examine more closely the assumption that network newsprocessors think alike and arrive at the same news judgements, producers, correspondents and congressmen were asked to select from a list of thierteen issues the ones they believed received the most coverage and the ones they thought should have received the most coverage. Congressmen and producers were in total disagreement over what issues were covered by network television during the 95th Congress. House members said "sensational" issues like the Korean and Assassinations Committee investigations dominated coverage while producers maintained that energy issues received the most air time. As to what should have received the most coverage, both groups agreed on energy conservation. Thus, congressmen believed there was a huge gap between what they thought was news and what was actually broadcast. The producers believed that the issues actually covered were the most important. Correspondents, however, didn't totally share their superiors' company line. Two correspondents believed the social security tax warranted more coverage on the evening news than it received. (Table 1). Intra-group agreement among executive producers was unanimous, reinforcing the stereotype that the networks present a singular picture of world events each night on the evening news. Although there was far more variance among congressmen then producers, congressional preferences to "substantive" over "sensational" issues was unmistakable.

TABLE I

		Issues Congressmen thought received most coverage		Issues Congressmen thought "should have" received most coverage	
1.	Korean Scandal		47%		4%
2.	Assassination Probe		14		0
3.	ERA Extension		11		1
4.	Energy Conservation	X ***	9	X ***	26
5.	Natural Gas	X	7		13
6.	Kemp-Roth Tax Cut	X	5		5
7.	Tax Reform	X	4	X	23
8.	Labor Law Reform		2		3
9.	Social Security Tax		2	XX	4
10.	Turkish Arms Embargo		1		3
11.	Civil Service Reform		0		5
12.	Military Appropriations		0		5
13.	Budget Resolutions		0		8

* Executive Producers

X Correspondents

An important part of the network newsprocessing system is the perceptions of news sources, newsgatherers, and newsprocessors toward each other. Presumably, each group not only knows what it believes but has an idea of what the other group believes as well. Thus, the groups within the network newsporcessing system do not act independently of one another but are inseparably linked. The balance within that system could be affected substantially by the perception each group in the system has toward the other. In the case of network coverage of the U.S. House of Representatives, dissatisfaction by House members with their lack of access and dissatisfaction by the networks over coverage prohibitions make the relationships interesting.

Data in this study show that network producers and correspondents were far better predictors than House members. Congressmen thought network producers believed the "sensational" issues (Korean scandal, Assassinations Committee investigation, the Equal Rights Amendment deadline extension) were the most important issues during the 95th Congress, but the producers picked most of the same issues as congressmen. Conversely, correspondents and producers were able to correctly predict the response of House members. This result corroborates the Dyer and Nayman study of Colorado legislators and reporters which concluded that "reporters and legislators had quite similar views which the reporters recongnized and the legislators did not".[9]

On the congruity measure, members of Congress believed that they and executive producers were adversaires but network employees thought they had much in common with congressmen. Correspondents and producers, meanwhile, saw themselves as agreeing with each other but the feeling was more pronounced among producers. Producers in New York thought correspondents would take their side on practically every issue, reflecting a strong system of social control operating within the networks. Correspondents, while agreeing with producers on many issues, did not share the producers' view of total unanimity.

CONCLUSIONS

Member os the U.S. House of Representatives believe network coverage of their institution is simplistic, fragmentary and inadequate and that network newsgathering routines fail to accomodate some of the most substantive and important issues addressed by the House. Because these issues are so complex and develop over too long a time period to conform to the rigidities of the network news format, they are often underplayed or ignored. Meanwhile, there is a disincentive for producers and correspondents to upset the status quo. By controlling access to the evening news, executive producers in New York possess significant potential for social control that allows little deviation from approved organizational norms. As a growing number of ambitious correspondents compete for a static amount of air time, they are increasingly tempted to gravitate only toward easily defined and simply told stories that are likely to be broadcast.

Despite evidence showing a strong pressure for conformity to organizational norms, this study showed that some correspondents privately disagreed with the priority given House stories and believed the networks were giving inadequate coverage to the House of Representatives. Meanwhile, executive producers exhibited extraordinary agreement in their views of what is news. While correspondents defined important issues using a variety of choices, the producers' perceptions were unanimous. This evidence reinforces the stereotype that network television news is controlled by persons with a singular perspective of world events.

This study showed a pronounced feeling of estrangement from the network television newsporcessing system among congressmen. House members saw changes in the status quo largely beyond their control while having diminishing expectations of increasing network access by sharpening their own communication skills. There was a growing belief that the House is locked into a low priority status in the network television newsprocessing system, relegated by factors beyond its control to a position over shadowed by the President and the Senate. Meanwhile, the networks apparently see no justification for changing their priorities to increase coverage of complicated legislative issues. There is a strong feeling that if change is to take place it is the congressmen who must conform to network newsgathering routines and not vice versa.

The coorientation method proved to be a valid instrument for attitudinally positioning the three groups involved in the network television newsprocessing system. The breech between congressional and network attitudes registered clearly on the agreement spectrum. Each group's conceptions of "what is news" clashed repeatedly. This method seems particularly useful in gauging the attitudes of correspondents who generally subscribe to network norms but privately may disagree with producers and side with low priority news sources. Any further studies involving these three constituent groups should focus more on the correspondent's behavior in this system.

While the coorientation method helped to piece together some attitudinal sketches, it was difficult to infer information or make generalizations based on this data alone. The evidence contained in this type of study must be linked closely with participant observer and/or content analysis data. Using this study as a supplementary measure to organizational research the chances of presenting a composite picture of network television news systemic behavior could be improved.

Footnotes

[1]E.J. Epstein, News from nowhere, New York: Vintage Books, 1973.

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[4]T.M. Newcomb, "An approach to the study of communicative acts", Psychological Review, 60, 393-404, November 1953. S.H. Chaffee and J.M. McLeod, "Sensitization in panel design: A coorientational experiment," Journalism Quarterly, 45, 661-669, Winter, 1968. J. M. McLeod, "Issues and strategies in coorientational research," unpublished report presented to the Association for Education in Journalism, University of South Carolina, August, 1971.

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[7]Democrats were over-represented (79% respondents - 68% House) as were members with 1-4 years service in the House (47% respondents - 36% House). Otherwise, party, House tenure, and district location responses were very similar to those of the whole House.

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